

SAP Project 2016/17 Final Report Cover Sheet	
Project Title:	How can we maximize the use of the VLE to improve the student experience?
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How can we maximize the use of the VLE to improve the student experience?

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Abstract

The Blackboard Virtual Learning Environment is widely used across the University and following a successful SAP project in 2014, baseline standards were introduced to try to ensure a consistent experience for students when using this software. In 2016, baseline standards for course-wide sites were introduced and the use of Blackboard at both module and programme level was encouraged. This project aimed to gather student feedback on how the VLE is currently being used and seek their opinions on what could be changed to improve the student experience. Three focus groups were held with students from a range of courses from across the University. Questions around the general look and feel of the software, information provided and levels of interactivity were posed and students were asked to comment on the Blackboard home page, their course area and their module areas. A thematic analysis was carried out and the key issues are consistency, relevance, communication, support and look and feel. Based on the outcomes of this project, an action plan has been devised to address some of the issues raised.

Introduction

Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) have been defined as “a software system that combines a number of different tools that are used to systematically deliver content online and facilitate the learning experience around that content” (Weller, 2007). The University of Worcester has provided a VLE for all courses since 2004 and the use of this tool has grown steadily over the years. In 2014 a SAP project was carried out to look at the way in which the VLE was being used and seek student feedback on how it could be improved. As a result of this initial project, a set of Baseline Standards were introduced to provide structured guidance to staff when using the VLE and attempt to improve the consistency of the student experience in using this tool.

An audit of the use of Blackboard since the introduction of the Baseline Standards found that around 94% of modules were making use of the VLE with many going beyond the minimum and utilising additional tools for communication and assessment.

There have been a number of updates and improvements to the functionality provided by the VLE since then and this project aimed to build on the findings of the earlier one to elicit student feedback on how the technology can be better used to enhance both their learning and their overall experience as a student. This also gave students the opportunity to contribute to the development of technology enhanced learning and ensure that future developments are informed by the student voice.

Method

This project utilised a structured focus group approach to elicit information from students. Cousins (2009) states that focus groups are useful in Higher Education research because they can elicit rich data from group interactivity. They can also be good for research into student experiences and evaluating educational software and support services.

A total of three individual focus groups were arranged at varying times over the course of two days to try and accommodate different timetables and allow as many students as possible to participate.

Participants

Participants were recruited to the project using a number of communication channels resulting in a random convenience sample. The focus groups were promoted using a Blackboard announcement, a message on the student SOLE page, and by distributing printed flyers via the Student Union. A Facebook event was set up which students could sign up to online and a link to the participant information sheet and consent form was provided at this point.

Despite widespread advertising and the offer of a £10 Amazon voucher as an incentive, recruitment was slow, with some students dropping out on the day of the focus group. Some further ad hoc recruitment was then carried out by handing out flyers in the canteen and Students Union on the day resulting in some last-minute participants.

A total of eighteen students from a range of different courses took part in the study.

Procedure

Upon arrival students were greeted by the moderator and participants all introduced themselves. Consent forms and information for participants sheets were distributed.

An introduction to the project was provided by the student moderator including the rationale for the project and the anticipated time to be taken. Students were encouraged to take part in the discussions with a positive attitude – it was not intended to be a complaints process but a consultation to gather genuine student feedback on good practice and what might be improved.

In addition, participants were reassured that this project was independent of their official course structure and no teaching staff would be involved in the data collection.

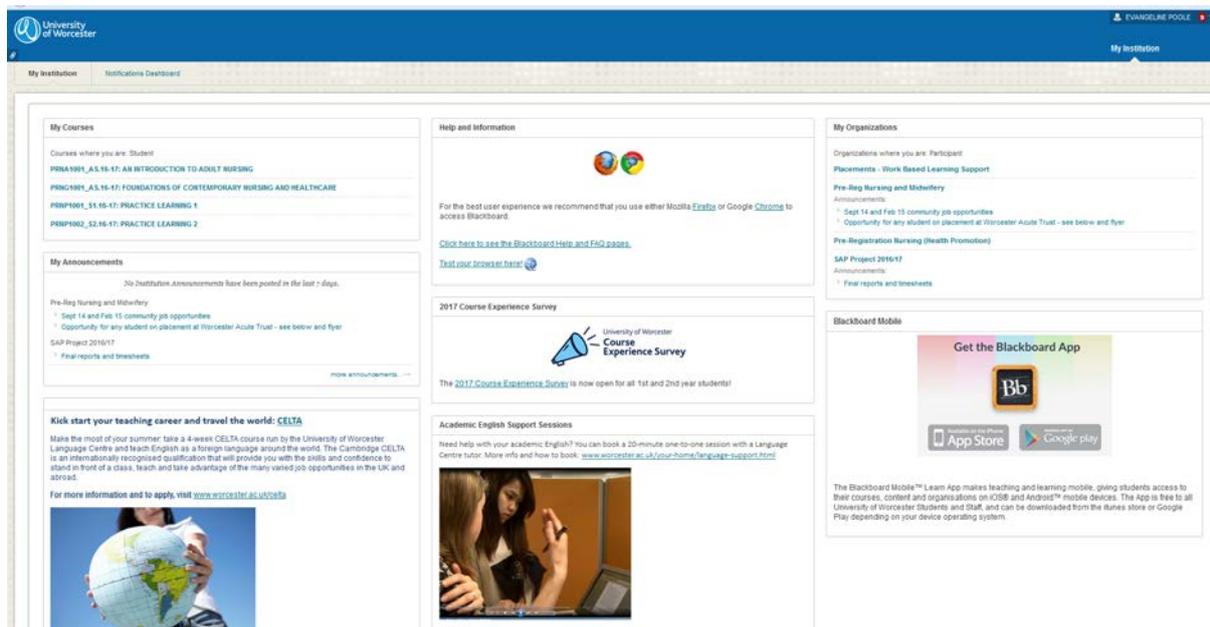
The focus groups were recorded and notes were also taken by an independent observer.

Part 1 – My Institution

The first part of the discussion focused on the “My Institution” page on Blackboard. Students were shown the page on the display screen as a prompt and a series of questions were asked including:

- What information do you find useful on this page?
- What do you think of the layout?
- Can you think of how this page could be improved?

Figure 1 – My Institution Screen Shot



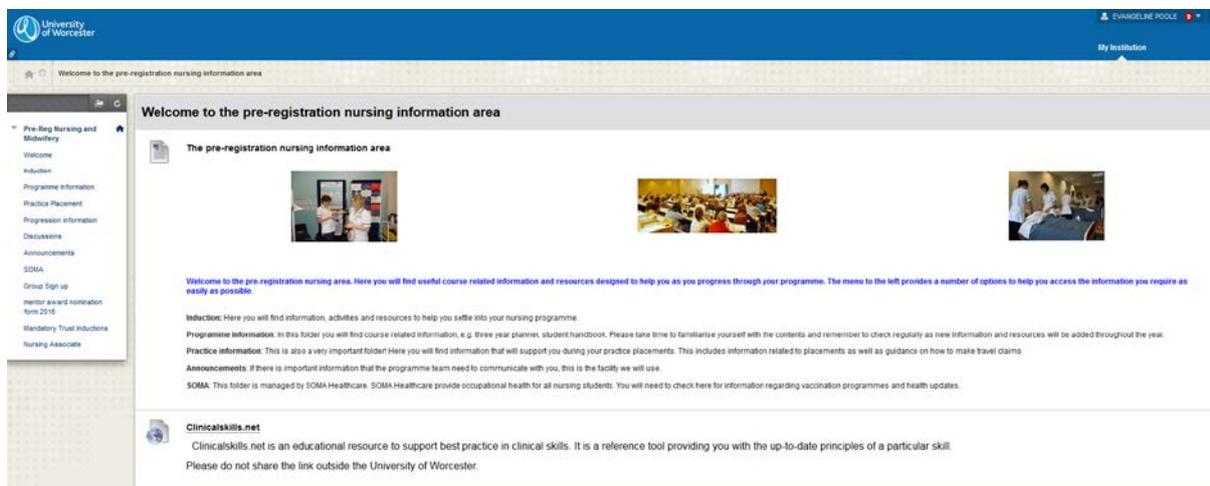
Part 2 – My Organizations

Some courses have an overarching Course page on Blackboard which provides information to all students across all years on a particular course. The second section of the discussion focused on the use of course-wide pages and the student moderator showed an example of such a page.

Questions asked during this section of the focus group included:

- Do you all have a page which covers your entire course?
- If you have one, what do you find useful about your course page?
- Is there anything you think could be improved?

Figure 2 – Course-wide site screen shot



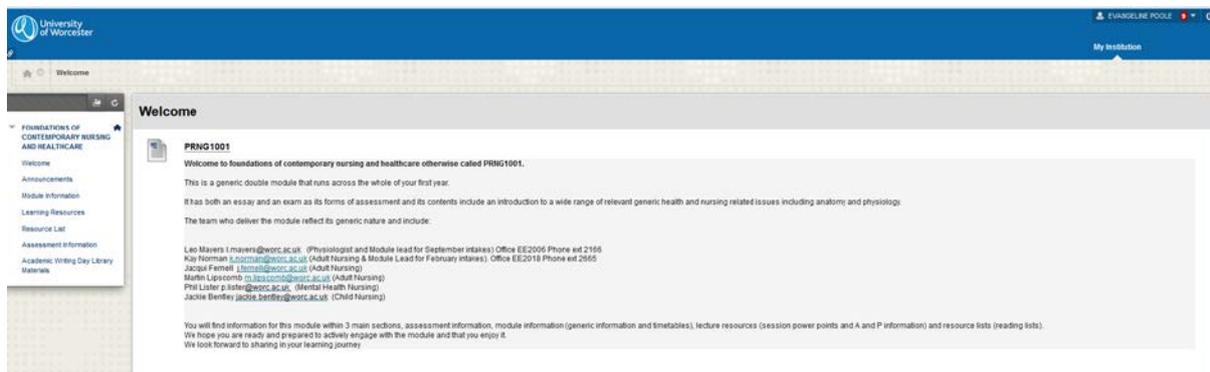
Part 3 – My Courses

The third section of the focus groups looked at how tutors were using Blackboard for learning and teaching on individual modules. An example of a module was shown on the screen during this section and an explanation of the Baseline Standards for VLE use was provided. A paper copy of the current baseline standards was circulated for students to see the expectations of how Blackboard should be used by tutors.

Questions discussed during this section included:

- Do your modules all follow these guidelines?
- Are they still relevant?
- Would you like to see any changes?

Figure 3 – Module screen shot



Analysis and Discussion

Analysis of the recordings of the focus groups indicated the emergence of five main themes:

- Consistency
- Relevance
- Communication
- Support
- Look and feel

Consistency

This was a key theme that emerged from the previous work in this area and was shown to still be relevant in the current study. The main area in which this theme emerged was within the individual module areas where students expressed frustration with the lack of consistency across modules in a course. One comment referred to different layouts in different modules causing confusion, whilst another stated that “..all the information on one page makes it difficult to find stuff”.

Despite the introduction of the baseline standards, one student still reported that one of their lecturers did not use Blackboard at all stating that “one lecturer doesn’t use it at all so we’re just left in the dark”. This signifies the reliance that students have on being able to access course materials online and highlights the need for the baseline standards to be adhered to in a consistent way across courses.

Relevance

The comments relating to relevance spread across the range of different pages discussed. In relation to the “My Institution” page several students stated that they did not look at any information on this page other than “My Courses”. The advertising and promotional sections of the page were deemed to be irrelevant and made the page cluttered.

The “My Courses” block was also problematic for some students as all modules across a three year course are shown at the same time and not grouped by academic year. One student had hidden their old modules using the settings options but most students were unaware that this was possible.

Many of the students in the focus groups did not have a course-wide site, however they felt that this would be useful for providing more general course-focused information.

In relation to module areas, students reported that some modules had been copied from previous years and old material not removed or updated.

Communication

Students found that the use of the announcements tool in course-wide sites were sometimes inappropriate and they received messages that were not relevant to them e.g. a message for third years sent to all students.

One positive discussion point was the use of discussion boards for frequently asked questions. Students on the course where this was used found it really useful however other students said they did not know this was possible but thought it would be really useful if their lecturers used it.

Another suggestion for improvement around this theme was that lecturers could use the mid-module evaluation to ask students about their use of Blackboard and how it could be improved.

Support

On the whole students were happy with the use of Blackboard and indicated that its use is now an expectation. They did however feel that more support at the beginning of their course would have been useful. One student stated “it wasn’t properly explained to us” whilst another said that an introduction to Blackboard at the beginning would have been useful.

It was also noted that some of the personalisation options such as being able to hide old courses and modify notifications were not clear and had only been discovered by trial and error.

Look and Feel

Most of the students in the focus groups viewed the use of Blackboard as a “taken for granted” means of accessing their module resources and were relatively unconcerned about what it looked like other than the consistency of being able to navigate and find things easily. Some students did however comment on it being cluttered (particularly with regard to the “My Institution” page) boring, and a little outdated.

Outcomes

As a result of this project, the Learning and Teaching Technology Unit have devised an action plan that aims to address some of the issues that have arisen during the focus groups. These include:

- Blackboard facelift
 - Simplify the “My Institution” page so that only relevant information is displayed
 - Remove clutter
 - Update to a modern theme to improve user experience
- Separate modules into years
 - Technical work needed to display modules by academic year
 - Clear navigation and ease of use
- Introductory video for new starters
 - This will provide a virtual tour of the Blackboard interface
 - Highlight key features
 - Available to new users
- Blackboard top tips from students information sheet (see Appendix 1)
 - A resource for lecturers when using Blackboard
 - Based on student feedback

Impact

The impact of the project will be measured on an ongoing basis, however feedback from the conference presentation was very positive and the information sheets have been distributed to teaching staff.

Conclusions

This project has highlighted the potential students have for improving the quality of the services provided by the University. It is all too easy to provide a digital tool to support learning and teaching and assume that the way it is set up will be appropriate for all students. By consulting with students about their experience of using Blackboard, we are able to change the way in which it is set up, administered and supported so that students have a better learning experience.

Whilst the student experience of Blackboard is highly dependent upon how lecturers use it, we can also provide more tailored training and support materials which have been informed by the student voice.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the outcomes of this project are disseminated across all Academic Institutes to encourage best practice.

How might the project be replicated or extended

Learning technology tools and practices are constantly evolving so this project could be replicated annually to ensure the student voice continues to contribute to the development of the VLE.

References

Cousins, G (2009) *Researching Learning in Higher Education: An Introduction to Contemporary Methods and Approaches*. Routledge

Weller, M (2007) *Virtual Learning Environments: Using, choosing and developing your VLE* Routledge



Student Blackboard Wish List Top Ten

The student experience of Blackboard (BB) is heavily dependent on how lecturers use it, so based on student feedback, we've put together the top ten tips on what students would like to see in their modules on BB.

1. **Consistency** – it's good to have a course team approach so that all modules on a course have a similar layout and organization. Use the Baseline Standards to help make your BB sites more consistent.
2. **Ease of use** – clearly labelled files and folders make it much easier for students to find things.
3. **Navigation** – having all documents and links on one page makes it difficult for students to locate relevant information. Use the menu provided to separate types of information and categorise content logically. |

4. **Announcements** – use these to provide students with timely information – remember to enter an end date so the notification is removed when no longer relevant.
5. **Contacts** – ensure you include contact information so students can get in touch when they need to – a picture always helps!
6. **Relevance** - remove outdated and irrelevant information.
7. **FAQs** – use discussion boards to allow your students to ask questions.
8. **Mobile friendly** – many students access BB from mobile devices so make sure the information you upload is mobile friendly.
9. **Course wide sites** – if you haven't already got one, request a site for providing information across to all students on a course, great for generic information like job vacancies and training opportunities.
10. **Make it visual** – use of images and video can really brighten up a BB site and improve student engagement.

If you would like any advice with your Blackboard area, please contact the Learning and Teaching Technology Unit by emailing eos@worc.ac.uk and we would be happy to help.

Learning and Teaching Technology Unit
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